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ABSTRACT

Some critics of Robertson Davies' three novels that comprise the Salterton trilogy, "Tempest-Tost" (1951), "Leaven of Malice" (1954), and "A Mixture of Frailties" (1958) complain of their creaky novelistic machinery, suggesting that they merely show an essayist, or journalist, becoming a novelist. These three novels, however, can introduce students to a Davies world that reappears in the Deptford and Cornish trilogies. One reason these early novels might have appeared to be anomalies in twentieth-century fiction is that Davies employs unabashedly old-fashioned techniques. It is made quite clear that he likes a good suspenseful story involving a cast of talkative characters whose idiosyncrasies allow him to express his own attitudes in a satiric way. He brings his experiences both as playwright and essayist to the writing of novels, reveling in dialogue and comic scenes and coming forward in his best Samuel Marchbanks manner to express his opinions for the edification of the gentle reader. Davies pleases his audience because he combines the expected with the unexpected. Davies manipulates the reader to admire artistic genius on stage, in the concert hall, at the writer's desk, and in the painter's studio. He lets the reader see that those characters who are to be most admired are the ones who bring magic to their artistic endeavors, and he stands behind them as the supreme prestidigitator. (MG)

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DAVIES THE MANIPULATOR OF THE SALTERTON TRILOGY

Some critics of Davies' three novels that comprise the Salterton trilogy--Tempest-Tost (1951), Leaven of Malice, (1954) and A Mixture of Frailties (1958)--complain of their creaky novelistic machinery, suggesting that they merely show "an essayist, or journalist, becoming a novelist" (Radford 20). In a 1958 largely favorable article on them, Ivon Owen, remarks that Davies "stands curiously apart from the mainstream of contemporary fiction" (63). But, curiously, too, Davies' three novels have endured through the 1980's and now delight readers in Penguin's handsome one-volume format. Davies has joined the mainstream, partly because of the six novels that followed the Salterton series, so that now admirers of The Lyre of Orpheus (1988) want to read everything he wrote previously. It is true that Davies has evolved into a different sort of novelist than he was in Tempest-Tost, but I think the fictional techniques he displays in the early novels can be defended.

For example, one might pay attention to what the narrator of John Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany (1989) says in praise of Davies. John Wheelwright, an American who now teaches English at a private high school for girls in

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Toronto, is arguing with a woman colleague of "prickly disposition":

> She even quarreled with my choice of teaching Tempest-Tost; she suggested that perhaps it was because I failed to recognize that Fifth Business was "better." Naturally, I have taught both novels, and many other works by Robertson Davies, with great--no, with the greatest--pleasure. I stated that I'd had good luck teaching Tempest-Tost in the past. . . .
>
> "Furthermore," I said, "I consider Mister Davies an author of such universal importance that I choose not to teach what is `Canadian' about his books, but what is wonderful about them." (468-69)

Tempest-Tost traces the efforts of Salterton's amateur theatrical group to stage a production of Shakespeare's Tempest, and Irving's John Wheelwright notes, "Students feel so much like amateurs themselves....I think they find all the intrigues of the local drama league both extremely funny and extremely familiar" (468).

One reason that these early novels might have appeared to be anomalies in twentieth-century fiction is that Davies employs unabashedly old-fashioned techniques. It is quite clear that he likes a good suspenseful story involving a cast of talkative characters, whose idiosyncrasies allow him to express his own attitudes in a satiric way. He brings his experiences both as playwright and as essayist to the writing of novels, reveling in dialogue and comic scenes and

coming forward in his best Samuel Marchbanks manner to express his opinions for the edification of the gentle reader. All three novels are entertaining, filled with comic characters whose entanglements propel the plots. Furthermore, Davies manipulates us to approve of or condemn the characters according to their attitudes toward art. The good ones share Davies' tastes in theatre, art, music, and literature.

Davies also pleases because he combines the expected with the unexpected. The novel form of his first trilogy has the familiar eighteenth-century shape so that the reader knows that everything will be settled satisfactorily in the end despite obstacles to the main characters' success sprinkled along the way. Monica Gall, of A Mixture of Frailties, is a picaresque heroine whose innate good sense and talent help her to overcome her lower-class origins as member of the Heart and Hope gospel quartet in Salterton and mature into an internationally recognized singer, who triumphs on the opera stage in Venice. Her experiences and the people she meets are not predictable, however, and the surprises keep us reading. For example, who would expect that she might be considered guilty of the murder of a promising composer?

Similarly, we know that Salterton's amateur drama group will eventually produce The Tempest despite petty bickering, accidents, and three men's rivalry over one girl. But who could predict Old Bill the horse's bizarre electrocution or

that the high school math teacher playing the part of Gonzalo will attempt to hang himself in the potting shed? It is also fairly predictable that the perpetrator of the practical joke that impels the plot of Leaven of Malice will be caught, but who would expect all the deliciously comic intrigue to be found in a small town newspaper office, among faculty at the local university, and on the vestry of the Anglican cathedral?

Salterton could as easily be nineteenth-century Barsetshire removed to Canada and given twentieth-century appurtenances. Readers have the feeling they are being guided by a genial Fielding or Trollope in judging how the characters' actions deviate from the golden mean. Ivon Owen identifies Davies' authorial stance this way: "To have his full approval you should be certain things: Celtic in ancestry; upper-class in education and tastes; Anglican, at least in background; an artist; and not a professional academic" (57). Davies was still a newspaper editor and publisher when he wrote these novels, and in Leaven of Malice, he has his editor character eyeing a possible honorary degree from Waverley University for his help in setting up a journalism curriculum there. Davies satirizes academic life as viewed from the outside. None of his artists--his musician characters in the trilogy--is an academic. All must make their way in the world unassisted by any benevolent university that pays their salaries.

The artist unaffiliated with academe who best epitomizes Davies' own view is Humphrey Cobbler, eccentric choirmaster and organist at St. Nicholas Anglican cathedral, knowledgeable and talented but viewed suspiciously by the Philistines. One character sums up the case against him: "he's not right in the head....and he's such an untidy dresser. And sometimes he laughs out loud at nothing. And he never gets his hair cut" (117). Besides, he drinks. Thus, this person concludes, he would not be a suitable choice to do the music for The Tempest. More qualified, in her opinion, is Mr. Snairy, whose Vaudevillian accordian trio would please the public better.

In none of the Salterton novels is Cobbler the main character, but he has important functions in all three. He capably directs the music for The Tempest in Tempest-Tost--all Purcell, and finding himself falsely accused in Leaven of Malice, he acquits himself well. Then in A Mixture of Frailties, Cobbler is the one who discovers Monica Gall in the Heart and Hope Quartet and starts her on the way to being a trained musician. She may have all the wrong ideas about music at first, but he recognizes her talent despite her lack of training and bad taste.

Humphrey Cobbler, apparently like his creator, also has a mischievous streak. In Tempest-Tost he incites the three rivals for the leading lady's affections to fight among themselves at an after-rehearsal party. Davies writes, "He had had the fun of provoking a quarrel; he now looked

forward with appetite to the fun of patching it up" (155). Cobbler often makes speeches that upset stodgy people. Once he says, "Wouldn't it be an awful sell for a lot of us--all the artists, and jokers, and strivers-after-better-things--if God turned out to be the Prime Mover of capitalist respectability?" (354). A woman listening to him thinks, "a man who talked like Cobbler ought to be taken over by the Government, and taught responsibility" (355). He is playful about his music, too, concluding an interview with the assistant director of The Tempest in this manner:

> He turned again to the keyboard, and began to improvise very rapidly in the manner of Handel, singing the words, "Pass the buck" in a bewildering variety of rhythms and intonations. (122)

Cobbler's knowledge of music literature, sacred as well as secular; his talent verging on genius; and his obvious enjoyment of his profession despite his low salary do not endear him to the more strait-laced citizens of Salterton. But Davies lets us see that they simply do not appreciate art. When Cobbler gets into trouble on Halloween for singing Purcell's "Man, Man, Man,/ Is for the woman made,/ And the woman for the man!" in the cathedral, Dean Jevon Knapp, though upset, stands by him, for the Dean is another character on the right side in Davies' scheme of things. Cobbler apologizes for letting his exuberance outrun his judgment, it being Halloween and all.

These cavortings in the cathedral encourage Cobbler's enemies to try to pin the blame on him for the false engagement notice in the local newspaper, but the real culprit is shown to be a badly trained, vulgar singing and elocution teacher--not a true artist. In a showdown over the whole affair in the newspaper editor's office, Cobbler cannot resist singing "very softly, under his breath, [Macheath's air] `The charge is prepared,/ The lawyers are met,/ The judges all ranged--/ A terrible show!'" (449)

It is easy to see that Davies uses Cobbler as his artist spokesperson, and it is comical that the characters who come in for the harshest satire in Tempest-Tost and Leaven of Malice either take art too seriously or have no respect for it all. Hector Mackilwraith is overly reverent before Shakespeare's genius and heavy handedly approaches the role of Gonzalo. Professor Vambrace has grandiose notions about presenting Shakespeare, while others are simply ignorant. Valentine Rich, the professional director of the play, and Cobbler are the true artists who understand the nature of creative performance.

Davies' punishment for bad artists, con artists, or the untalented gets progressively more severe in the novels. In Tempest-Tost Professor Vambrace is made to look foolish when he insists on eating grapes, as a sort of rhetorical gesture while reciting a speech. Worse, the stolid math teacher, Hector Mackilwraith, attempts suicide, after looking pretty ridiculous in his pursuit of a girl half his age. But at

the end of the novel he is on his way from being a mere teacher to becoming a bureaucrat in the Canadian department of education--a suitable reward--or punishment--depending on how you look at it. In Leaven of Malice the unfortunate music and elocution teacher, Bevill Higgin, endures the scorn of the intelligentsia and will probably have to skulk out of town unemployed.

In A Mixture of Frailties, however, the misguided genius composer, Giles Revelstoke, dies for his artistic transgressions. Unlike Cobbler, he tends to be mean, vicious, and spiteful. He uses people to get his way, hates any sort of criticism no matter how justified, and refuses to admit that he is no conductor, but that he should confine his activities to writing and composing. Despite his originality, talent, and knowledge of music--even despite that fact that he is Welsh, upper-class in education, Anglican in background, and not an academic-- Davies kills him off for failing to be more human, and possibly for failing to recognize that music should be fun. In this third novel of the trilogy, Davies fully develops several musician characters whom Monica Gall meets during her training. She is rewarded at the end, after her unworthy lover and mentor, Giles Revelstoke, dies, with an offer of marriage from Sir Benedict Domdaniel, the internationally famous conductor who has guided her education. Davies has created him to be the master manipulator in A Mixture of Frailties. Sir Benedict arranges every detail of Monica's

education and then, Pygmalion-like, falls in love with his creation.

These three novels introduce students to a Davies world that reappears in the Deptford and Cornish trilogies. In all, he manipulates us to admire artistic genius on stage, in the concert hall, at the writer's desk and in the painter's studio. The uninformed, the ignorant, and the untalented come in for harsh criticism and even death. His characters take their place in his Divine Comedy according to rightness of their attitudes toward creativity. This theme runs throughout the nine novels, from Salterton's amateur production of The Tempest in the first one, to a professional, university-sponsored production of an Arthurian opera in The Lyre of Orpheus. Davies lets us see that those characters who are to be most admired are the ones who bring magic to their artistic endeavors. And Davies stands behind them all as the supreme prestidigitator.

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